

An Evening with John McCutcheon

Having spent an hour on the phone interviewing singer-songwriter John McCutcheon, I was looking forward to his concert immensely. He had been charming and funny and full of great stories. I was more excited to see him take the stage, banjo in hand, than I would have been to see any rock star.

After an endearing, "Hey," he began to sing. "Oh, I wish I was a mole in the ground..." What?!!! Had I heard incorrectly? Nope. He continued, "I wish I was a mole in the ground/Twas as a mole in the ground I'd root that mountain down/I wish I was a mole in the ground."

But there was no need for concern. After one stanza, McCutcheon picked at his banjo and launched into a story about the song that made its choice perfect.

Growing up in Minnesota, McCutcheon played the banjo. He calls it cultural denial. He told of finding a 78 recording of the 1928 song "I Wish I Was a Mole in the Ground" by Bascom Lamar Lunsford. Title aside, it had what he was looking for -- banjo accompaniment. And so he bought the LP and taught himself the song.

McCutcheon's first gig at a folk festival was at the Mountain Dance & Music Festival in Asheville, North Carolina. The Festival was founded in 1928, and there were some serious singer-songwriters there. McCutcheon was admittedly nervous to perform before an audience of 5,000 folk music fans. But he had learned that none other than Bascom Lamar Lunsford was the founder of the Festival. He knew just the right song with which to make his debut.

McCutcheon hadn't noticed the wizened gray-haired old man standing just offstage. You guessed it -- Lunsford was not only still alive, but at the Festival. Knowing that might have led McCutcheon to pick a different song. And he certainly wouldn't have regaled the audience with the well-known fact of Lunsford's legacy. But all turned out well. And, as many of McCutcheon's stories end, the two became friends during the "too short" remainder of Lunsford's life.

The story alone would have made me eager to hear the rest of the song. But McCutcheon's commentary sealed the deal. With reference to the lyric of "rooting that mountain down," Mr. McCutcheon said he liked the idea of rooting the mountain down from the bottom up. "We've learned that nothing trickles down," he said. "It all percolates up."



No song was performed without an explanation of its genesis. McCutcheon talked about reading something in the paper one day and telling his wife about it with a bit of outrage. "It sounds like a John McCutcheon song to me," she said. "And I know just the person to write it."

After obliquely commenting that it was a song we needed to hear right now, McCutcheon launched into "Y'All Means All." It's a song about acceptance and caring from the perspective of a Southern grandmother. She invites everyone to her table for supper even--or perhaps especially--those people she doesn't like so much.

What John omitted in his commentary to the politically conservative Charlotte County audience was the content of the article that had inspired the song. It was about the North Carolina law requiring transgender people to use bathrooms that correspond to the sex on their birth certificates. The White House had revoked the Executive Order on the issue a couple of days before the concert.



One of my other favorite songs from the evening was "Streets of Sarajevo." The song was inspired by the actions of Vedran Smailovic, also known as the Cellist of Sarajevo. In 1992, during the Siege of Sarajevo, a bombing killed 22 people standing on a breadline in front of a bakery. For 22 consecutive days following the bombing, Smailovic exited a nearby building wearing a tuxedo and carrying his cello and a folding chair. He set up his chair and proceeded to play Tomaso Albinoni's "Adagio in G Minor." Soldiers warned him he was making himself a target of sniper attacks, but he persisted until each victim had been acknowledged in this way.

In the song, McCutcheon sings, "And every day he made me wonder/Where did he ever find/The music midst the madness/The courage to be kind." (To see an incredibly powerful YouTube video set to McCutcheon singing his song, click [here](#).) And while that alone gives me goosebumps, there's more.

As I said, McCutcheon has a habit of becoming friends with everyone he encounters. The song led to a friendship between McCutcheon and Smailovic. In fact, the two recorded a special version of "Streets of Sarajevo" with Smailovic accompanying McCutcheon on the cello.



Vedran Smailovic in Sarajevo rubble



One way to get the recording is to buy a copy of McCutcheon's book "Flowers of Sarajevo." The book translates the events depicted in the song into language understandable by children. It also comes with a CD that includes both the McCutcheon/Smailovic collaboration and a performance by Smailovic of the haunting Adagio. Needless to say, I bought a copy.

I suspect it's obvious that I have become a huge John McCutcheon fan. I guarantee that you will as well if you hear John perform. He travels the country, so there's a chance he'll be coming to a location near you no matter where you're located. It is worth making the effort to get there.

Written by: Nanette Crist



The Rotary Club of Murdock wishes to thank the hundreds of Riverwood residents who contributed to making the John McCutcheon Fundraising Concert, last Saturday, February 25th, a tremendous success!

Everyone in attendance was thoroughly entertained. Once again, John gave a great performance; he is a marvelous story teller, singer, song leader and musician. His stories and songs made us laugh and sometimes brought tears to our eyes. We can all relate to the stories he tells and the message in his songs. His musicianship on the banjo, guitar, auto harp, piano and especially the hammer dulcimer kept us on the edge of our seats all night.

The funds raised during the concert go to various children projects in Charlotte County. Each year we give all the third graders in the County a Dictionary. We award scholarships to Port Charlotte High School seniors to help further their educations. We also award scholarships to the Charlotte Technical College. One of our prime objectives this year is to help educate parents and grandparents in water safety for children. Each year Florida has the highest number of child drownings in the country. If our efforts save the life of one child, it is worth the work expended. The Rotary Club of Murdock also supports; End Polio Now, Gift of Life, the Wheelchair Foundation, Shelter Box, RYLA and S4TL. For more information about these projects, or if you're interested in joining Rotary, visit our website, www.murdockrotary.org.

Once again, thanks for attending the concert and I am sure you had a most enjoyable evening!

Submitted by: Walt Powers, President, The Rotary Club of Murdock